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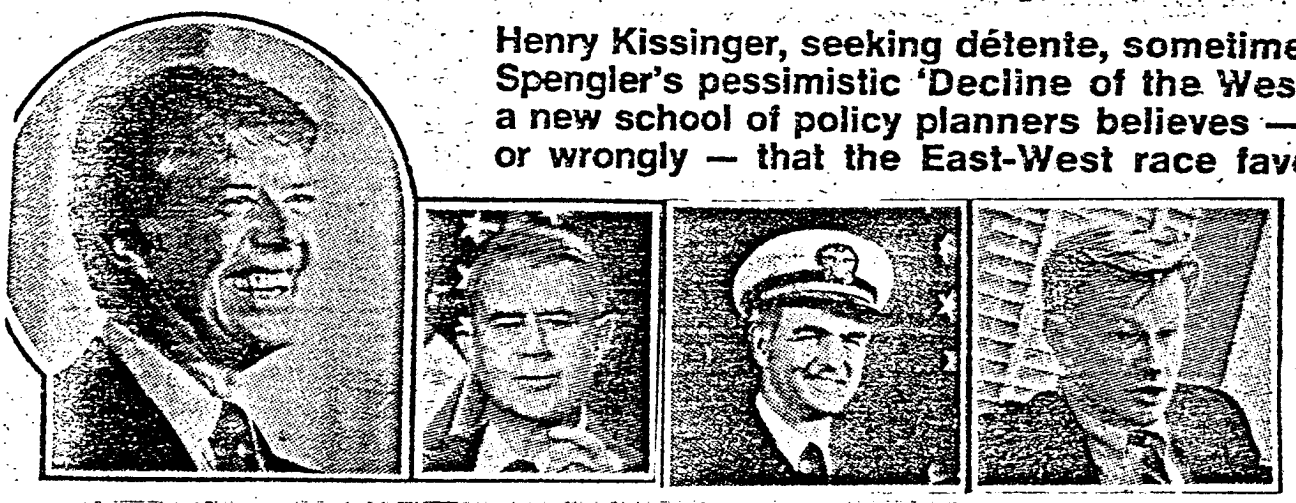
Rise of the Carter optimists

Henry Kissinger, seeking détente, sometimes cited Spengler's pessimistic 'Decline of the West.' Now a new school of policy planners believes — rightly or wrongly — that the East-West race favors U.S.



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Washington

Almost unnoticed, a profound revolution has taken place in the way the men who run the United States view Washington's race with Moscow.

Their aim is still détente. The Kissinger-Nixon-Ford policies toward the Soviet bloc and the Peking counterbalance to that bloc are still followed in rough outline.

But the new atmosphere is radically different: détente-out-of-optimism instead of détente-out-of-pessimism. The dark Spenglerian worries of the gloomier moments of the Kissinger era have been replaced by a new confidence at the top.

Rightly or wrongly, the Carter-Vance-Brzezinski-Turner team discards the view that a détente deal has to be struck quickly while the odds are still favorable — because the West is declining, the East rising. Instead, they say, détente can be afforded precisely because Moscow cannot in the foreseeable future close the gap on Western precision technology.

With variations from leader to leader, they argue that the Kremlin has thrown its all into heavy weaponry as an instrument of policy but has not surmounted the increasing sophistication of Western weapons. Result, in their view: in neither the world economic race nor the arms race is Moscow — with its heavy 19th-century ideology — closing the gap.

One is tempted to call this the "new optimism." The President himself recently referred to "a new American foreign policy — a policy based on constant decency in its values and on an optimism in its historical vision."

But "optimism" is too simplistic a description, say some of the President's supporters. Whatever word one uses to describe it, however, the President and the members of his national security team have rejected the "pessimism" of former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, who, in his darker moments, appeared to believe in the decline of the West. More specifically, they reject what they describe as alarmist views of Soviet strength, views which were held not so much by Dr. Kissinger as by other members of President Gerald R. Ford's national security team.

The new team, including in particular Mr. Carter and his Secretary of Defense, Central Intelligence Agency Director, and National Security Adviser, view the Soviet Union as a power which can do little well other than build weapons; which even in the field of military technology lags behind the United States; and which stands no chance of matching the economic strength of the West.

Here is what some of the t

no reason for immediate or grave alarm about our ability to deter major military actions by the Soviet Union. ... Worst case estimates of Soviet power do not do a service to American strength throughout the world."

• Adm. Stansfield Turner, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, refers to the Soviet variety of communism as a "dying ideology" and argued in a Foreign Affairs magazine article before his appointment that "a doomsday picture" of growing Soviet naval stength presented by the U.S. military to the Congress "may negatively influence other nations' perceptions of our naval effectiveness."

• In his writings, Mr. Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, sees the Soviet variety of communism as a conservative, bureaucratized, and fading doctrine which failed to live up to its promises.

• Andrew Young, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, believes that Americans shouldn't get "all paranoid" about communists. In economic competition, he told newsmen, "we do everything so much better" than the Soviets that there is nothing to fear. While Mr. Young often appears to be out of line with official policy, there is an optimism about his attitudes which is perfectly in tune with the rest of the Carter administration.

Mr. Carter himself has gone a long way to refute the more extreme interpretations of Soviet power, arguing that "we're still far stronger than they are in most means of measuring military strength." His remark to congressmen about some people getting nervous every time General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev sneezes seems to epitomize his attitude.

At its best, say Carter supporters, the new vision could lead to:

1. A new foreign policy consensus on the part of the American public — and within the Democratic Party — at a time when many Americans are deeply suspicious of those in power.

2. A tapping of a new generation of talent and a new outpouring of energy and ideas on the part of those charged with implementing foreign policy.

3. A self-assurance that would mean fewer "knee jerk" reactions to complicated situations and less of a tendency to leap to the support of any regime, no matter how unsavory, if it professes anticommunism.

At its worst, say skeptics, Mr. Carter's upbeat vision will create frustration over unfulfilled expectations and lead to a dangerous overconfidence, empty moralizing, and, as one diplomat put it, a "naive presumptuousness."

Not every expert agrees with the analysis which contrasts Kissinger "pessimism" to Carter "optimism." Prof. Stanley Hoffmann, the distinguished Harvard political scientist and former academic colleague of